

A Tipping Point For Jews ?

Are San Francisco area Jews less Jewish than those in the rest of the country? The latest population study suggests that there may be some reason to think so.



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However, surprisingly enough, the index of intermarriage does not point in that direction. From the rumors which float around the country, one would think that the San Francisco area is the intermarriage capital of the Jewish world. However, Dr. Fred Massarik, who just conducted the first comprehensive study of the national Jewish population, and also just completed the local study, concluded: "The ratio of intermarriage (in San Francisco, Marin and the Peninsula) as a whole currently is near the national level."

Nor is there much difference between San Francisco and the rest of the country in the number of Jews who have left the fold. Nationally, about 98 percent of all heads of household who were born Jewish, have remained Jewish. In the San Francisco area, about 92 percent of all heads of households who were born Jewish, are still Jewish. And in each case, there are some (about one percent) who are now Jewish, but were not born Jewish.

In the matter of affiliation with Jewish organizations, San Francisco actually does a little better than the rest of the country. About 59 percent of the Jews in this area belong to one or more Jewish organizations, as against 58 percent of the national Jewish population. Incidentally, that represents a substantial increase over the year 1959, when Dr. Massarik found that only 40 percent of the Jews in this area belonged to one or more Jewish organizations.

However, congregational membership contrasts significantly with organizational membership, both locally and nationally. Across the country, about 46 percent of the Jews belong to a congregation; in the San Francisco area, about 41 percent, which is pretty close. It is noteworthy that both locally and nationally more Jews belong to Jewish organizations than to congregations. And San Francisco is about where it was in 1959, when about 39 percent of the population belonged to a congregation.

But the startling figure is this one: Almost half (46 percent) of the Jews in the San Francisco area say that they *never* attend religious services, as against little more than a quarter (27 percent) of the national Jewish population. (In both cases, more than a third of those who do attend services, attend "one to five times," which probably means, for the most part, the High Holy Days.) For San Francisco, this seems to represent a substantial drop-off from 1959, when the study reported that a third of the Jews in this area never attended religious services.

A little analysis could provide reasons for some of the comparative national and local figures. For example, the occupational and economic level of San Francisco Jewry is higher than that of national Jewry; and that could explain, among other things, the higher organizational affiliation in this area. But the most interesting aspect of these figures requires some deeper analysis: Most Jews are willing to stay as Jews and identify as Jews; about half will join some Jewish organization (a pretty high level of identification); but almost half never attend a single religious service.

To state it grossly, the figures seem to suggest a rising "ethnic" consciousness, and a dropping "religious" consciousness. It is true that the ethnic and the religious have always been pretty close in Jewish life. The Jewish people have always been able to maintain its vitality with some pattern of "selective affiliation:" some people relating to the body of Jews in one way, some in another. But in that organic whole, there has always been some substantial part relating seriously to the Torah. When all is said and done, that is the center, the engine of Jewish life. America is a graveyard of ethnic groups which have lost touch with their particular centers. There *have* been Jewish communities which have disappeared too, having lost touch.

Is there a "tipping point," a point at which the proportion of Jews who never see the inside of a synagogue becomes so great, that the whole community turns down the road to fossilization? How long can a political or fraternal concern with Israel, for example, or with Soviet Jewry, sustain American Jewish life, without the nourishment of a *central* commitment and tradition?